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ABSTRACT

Important in the study of rhetorical history, systems theory advocates the reading of rhetorical works in their original climates, employing a macroscopic perspective and defining research problems with reference to rhetorical systems, including the rhetoric embodied in the treatise as well as in other treatises of the place or period. The total intellectual, cultural, and sociopolitical environment serves as the explanatory context. Among the values of the perspective are that it views the rhetoric of earlier ages in their own right without imposing alien concerns from another era; it cautions against efforts to recall classical doctrines in attempts to solve contemporary problems; and it directs attention to phenomena which might otherwise have escaped notice, such as the changing meanings of technical terms. Reservations concerning the use of systems theory as an historiographic perspective include the following: it would not be viewed as an exclusive frame for research; there is an unfortunate tendency to confuse theory and practice under the guise of pluralism; and some aspects of systems theory require considerably more precise definition. (DF)

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SYSTEMS THEORY AS AN  
HISTORIOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

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Professor Ehninger's initial speculations about rhetorical systems were prompted by a pedagogical desire to organize the "treatises usually studied in courses in the history of rhetoric . . . into some sort of viable framework."\* However, the direction of his own studies during the ensuing decade and the encouragement provided by Professor Scott's parallel reading of rhetorical history prompted him to expand his modest objective to one including articulation of a comprehensive approach to rhetorical historiography. The objectives of this approach are outlined in his keynote address to the 1978 Doctoral Honors Seminar on "Research Methods and Topics for the History of Rhetoric."† This document is a small part of his scholarly legacy, but reads as a manifesto which appears likely to influence several generations of rhetorical scholars. "The central task of the historian of rhetorical thought," he says, "is to explore the nexus between theories of communication and the intellectual, cultural and socio-political environments in which those theories arose and flourished."(p. 7) This is our "natural task" because all systems of rhetoric are "embedded" in an intellectual environment and studies which ignore this fact are devoid of interest. In his boldest assertion of this position, Ehninger judges harshly studies overlooking settings in which rhetorical theories were articulated.

\*"A Synoptic View of Systems of Western Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61 (1975), 448.

†"The Promise of Rhetoric," H TEXNH, Richard Leo Enos and William E. Weithoff, eds.

Bereft of their intellectual, cultural, and socio-political environments, accounts of what rhetoricians have written or said in times past are reduced to the level of annals. Instead of being history in the true sense of the word, they are arid catalogues of names, dates and passages; a record of who said what, when, under the influence of which predecessors and with what effect on those who followed.(pp. 7-8)

This claim is a stern condemnation of philological, biographical, and history-of-ideas perspectives commonly employed in historical research. As an alternative, Enninger proposed use of systems theory as an historiographic perspective within which individual documents and events are given meaning. Such usage would have major consequences because frames of reference structure the historian's task. They are the conceptual ground for defining research problems, determining which problems are worthy of investigation, selecting materials for examination, interpreting terms and passages within documents, and ordering sequences of events into coherent accounts. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to examine the utility of the historiographic perspective implied by systems theory. My position is that systems theory is an important addition to the historian's tool chest. However, it should not be viewed as an exclusive instrument. Alternate perspectives offer interpretations of interest and methodological features of the systems perspective reduce its reliability relative to other frames of reference.

In support of my position, I shall give a broad sketch of this perspective, comment on its values, and identify what I take to be its major limitations.

#### HISTORIOGRAPHIC FRAME

The historiographic perspective implied by systems theory can be understood most clearly by contrasting it with more commonly employed views. To begin, we should note the existence of two major schools of thought regarding the purpose of historical research in the humanities. The older school maintains that the purpose of historical research is recovering something of value from the past. In this sense, the humanities are said to "offer to all who can accept the lessons of human experience the best that has been thought or said or demonstrated about human life. . . . what is given us by the spectacles they provide is the collective wisdom which man has accumulated over the course of centuries."\* Fundamental to this school is an historiographic perspective which emphasizes the continuities linking one period of time with its predecessors and successors. By emphasizing recurring elements, the historian reinterprets the past in contemporary terms and creates a narrative with which modern man can feel comfortable. Leading examples of this procedure in our field include Baldwin's histories of

\*Paul G. Ruggiers, "The Humanities," in The World of Ideas, George L. Cross, comp. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 104.



classical and medieval rhetoric, and Paul Oskar Kristeller's recently published history of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric.

In recent years, the traditional approach to history in the humanities has been the object of increasing criticism, and an alternate school of thought has arisen buttressed by the works of Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault. Both Kuhn and Foucault emphasize the uniqueness of historical epochs and maintain that the purpose of historical studies is to understand the internal dynamic of intellectual processes as they functioned in their own context. Of course, we may gain an appreciation of some contemporary phenomena by understanding these dynamics, but the prospect is remote and reflects a more complex interpretive process than employed by historians of the older school. Whereas scholars employing the traditional perspective appear to borrow ideas and concepts from the past, scholars of the second school believe that concepts can be of value only at an abstract level in which they serve as exemplars of universal phenomena. At this level, the phenomena themselves are inconsequential and explication aims at disclosing characteristics of the relationships between the elements.

The historiographic frame provided by systems theory is strongly allied with the second school of thought and advocates reading rhetorical works in their original climates. This view is shared by several perspectives and

we may further distinguish systems historiography by noting that it differs from the others in determining the relevant unit of analysis and in selecting explanatory contexts.

Although exceptions are numerous, nonsystems perspectives generally select "microscopic" phenomena for analysis. These are doctrines or concepts found in single texts or a series of texts by a single author or group of authors. Examples include several topics which I believe have claimed more than their just share of our attention; viz., the meaning of "enthymeme" in Aristotle's Rhetorica, the source of Campbell's doctrines, and the extent of Whately's classicism. Exploring these topics involves secondary reliance on other materials and texts, but the research problems are defined with reference to a very limited number of documents.

In contrast, systems perspective employs a "macroscopic" perspective and defines research problems with reference to broader units of analysis. The units are rhetorical systems -- constituted by "any organized, consistent, coherent way of talking about" practical discourse. Such units may be found "not only [in] the rhetoric embodied in a single treatise, but also the rhetoric embodied collectively in the treatises of a given place or period."\* Such a unit extends "over an entire genus

\*"On Systems of Rhetoric," Contemporary Rhetoric (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), p. 49.

of treatises [and] submerges differences and details so as to call forth the common characteristics of rhetorical systems as organized wholes--the parts of which they are composed, the joints at which they are articulated, and the weaknesses to which they are prone."(p. 50) Examples of this procedure include Enninger's comparative studies of Blair, Campbell, and Whately; Gerard Hauser's examination of "Empiricism, Description, and the New Rhetoric;" and David Kaufer's analysis of rhetorical situations in different eras.

Systems historiography also differs from conventional frames in selecting the context within which phenomena are explained. Here again, nonsystems perspectives typically choose a far narrower and more precisely defined body of material. For example, textual studies generally take a single document to be the context for explaining its components. Biographical studies employ the works by a single author as the context, and studies of rhetorical schools expand the range to works composed by members of the school. Influence studies employ the works with which the author of the item in question was known to be familiar; and, history-of-ideas studies examine sequential expressions of ideas or concepts.

In contrast, systems historiography calls for the historian to take the total context in which ideas were presented as the explanatory context. The context for



explanation of the system is nothing less than the total "intellectual, cultural, and socio-political environment" in which the rhetorical system functioned. Naturally, exposition will be more selective than this, but the selection is to be made for convenience of reporting and not as a means of limiting the interpretive context.

#### VALUES of SYSTEMS HISTORIOGRAPHY

The value of the historiographic perspective implied by system theory is evident in three particulars. First, the view imposes what Ehninger calls a "healthy relativism" on our examinations of past rhetorics and rhetoricians. This relativism results from realizing that both the particular tenets and the general subject matter thought to constitute rhetoric have shifted a good deal from age to age. This realization allows us to view the rhetoric of earlier ages in their own right without imposing alien concerns from another era. Of course, we like to tell ourselves that "good people" and "sound scholars" have always recognized the time bound character of rhetoric, but exceptions to this fable more than prove the rule. For example, until recently a prominent form of doctoral dissertation consisted of superimposing classical divisions of the art on materials employing other orders. Not unexpectedly, such studies have found that Jeremy Bentham, Henry Home Kames, James Beattie, Francis Bacon, and countless others really had comprehensive theories of rhetoric--even though they evidently didn't know

it! A second group of exceptions include studies which impose the order of the trivium on the arts of discourse maintaining that rhetoric can be understood only by surveying its relationship to logic and grammar. I won't bore you with the citations because you know them as well as I. Although such surveys are valuable for understanding the role of rhetoric in medieval compends, it seriously distorts the raw materials when imposed on studies of Renaissance, Modern, and Contemporary theory. These rhetorical systems have primary associations with humanities,<sup>a</sup> aesthetics, and social psychology, respectively, and only incidental ties to grammar and logic.

Second, systems theory cautions us against efforts to resurrect classical or other doctrines from earlier ages in an attempt to solve contemporary problems. Again, we like to tell ourselves that substantial scholars have always avoided the temptation, but again the exceptions are damning. Witness the popularity of such texts as Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student during the past two decades. Notice also the recurrent attempts to promote inventional schemes based on archaic notions of *topoi*.

This caution should not be taken to mean that proponents of systems theory maintain that the past has nothing to offer us. Rather, such theorists hold that applications of archaic doctrines require attention to the attendant social and intellectual conditions that made it

possible for them to function. Any application of materials from prior ages requires a sophisticated translation process in which total systems are used as exemplars for complex relations between doctrine and environment. Professor Ried's essay on this program illustrates this process.

Finally, the historiographic perspective implied by systems theory is important because it has the unique ability to direct attention to phenomena which might otherwise escape notice. The class of phenomena I have in mind are caused by changing meanings assigned to technical terms. The most notorious instance of this phenomena is the use of "elocution" as a synonym for delivery. This evolution was observed by examining just materials in the rhetorical tradition because it was largely self-contained. However, equally important parallel evolutions can not be observed by studying the rhetorical tradition alone when meanings are developed in other bodies of literature. This problem becomes acute when rhetoricians employ terms in their new meanings without commenting on the change in signification. For example, during the eighteenth century, a number of theorists redefined rhetoric as an art of expression and used the term "expression" as a shorthand reference for a complex aesthetic theory developing under the influence of DeCartes' analysis of the mind-body problem and common sense theories of meaning. The influence of these forces on the theories of the era has only recently been recognized because a reading based on the rhetorical

tradition alone would interpret the word "expression" as a reference to either style or delivery.

### CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I should like to suggest three reservations regarding use of systems theory as an historiographic perspective. First, while it offers considerable insight into the processes through which the art developed, systems theory should not be taken as an exclusive frame for historical research. It may be useful to define systems not merely as chronological successions reflecting Enninger and Scott's pattern, but also typologically according to archetypal assumptions. Such an alternative makes it possible to explore the various workings of certain assumptions in a variety of contexts. Similarly, any text or event may be viewed profitably from any of the alternative historiographic perspectives mentioned above. For example, Aristotle's intentional doctrine may be viewed as a response to the stable social climate, but it may also be viewed as a textual problem requiring exegesis, an application of emergent logical theory, a development of methodological procedures implicit in Plato's writings, and the origin of a pseudo-dialectical tradition. Each view has merit and the choice between them depends less on the materials studied than the interests and abilities of the scholar conducting the inquiry.



The second reservation is that systems perspective appears to authorize typological confusion in the meaning of "rhetoric." In his first published sketch of the theory, Enninger suggested abandoning the "persistent search for a single master characteristic" or "defining property" which denotes rhetoric in all its guises.\* He thought this would solve some problems in the philosophy of rhetoric and his alternative was a pluralistic view recognizing the existence of many rhetorics. However, he consistently used the term, "rhetoric," to denote theories and principles thought to promote effective expression. Although not explicated in his published statements, he consistently distinguished between the theory of speaking and actual speeches, between art and artifact, between rhetoric and public address. Unfortunately, many readers have taken pluralism to authorize wholesale confusion between theory and practice. Scott is particularly sensitive to this danger and opens his contribution to the 1975 Colloquy by cautioning against ambiguity. Curiously--and the extent of the danger is evident in this fact--Scott's own definition fails to mark the difference between art and artifact, and he draws illustrative material from both domains.+

\*"On Rhetoric and Rhetorics," Western Speech, 31 (1967), 242.

+Scott defines rhetoric as "communication characterized by a high degree of intentionality and a high degree of structure, including distinctness of communicative roles; [which] eventuates in discourse in the public realm of experience rather than the private." (440)

Typological confusions, such as this, are objectionable not only because they violate logical purity, but because they obscure a number of potentially important research questions. Both rhetoric as theory and rhetoric as public address may arise from the felt needs of a society, but the claim is far easier to demonstrate in the second case than in the first. Moreover, the degree of correspondence between art and artifact in any era is an open question. Explaining deviations from theory in the practice of given ages is a most interesting task for both historians and critics. However, the typological confusions systems theory appears to authorize make it impossible to focus attention on these potentially productive lines of inquiry.

The final reservation is that some elements of the systems theory are less carefully defined than we might like. The result is a high degree of methodological imprecision. Systems are defined as organized or coherent means of describing a phenomena and the fact that several different patterns may fit any given set of facts makes identification of systems an endless task. For example, both Enninger and Scott view eighteenth-century rhetoric as a single system dominated by psycho-epistemic concerns. However, closer examination reveals the concurrent operation of three systems: a remnant of the pseudo-dialectical tradition carried over from liberal arts curricula, the dominant psycho-epistemic school, and an emerging aesthetic school marking the trend to romanticism. No matter whose

position you accept, its unfortunate that systems theory is not defined with sufficient precision to produce a more definitive answer.

Similarly, the explanatory context specified by systems historiography is less clearly defined than in other historiographic frames. Means of coping with textual problems, biographical and influence interpretations, and history-of-ideas examinations have been defined with great rigor. In contrast, the systems theorist is forced to examine virtually the whole of a culture or society in search for satisfying explanations. As a result, the reader of systems histories must place greater faith in the author because the research procedures do not permit replication of the study.

+See my "Shifting Conceptions of Rhetoric in the Eighteenth Century," unpublished paper presented to the Speech Communication Association (Minneapolis, 1978). This paper is available through ERIC (document number ED 168 062).